E-fulfillment: Go There
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The shift to e-business has brought with it a new expectation: e-fulfillment. In the e-business world, prospects and customers will expect to get their information via email or via a web site. Customers who buy software or information products may prefer to have them delivered over the Internet.

E-fulfillment performs valuable functions that replace the need for paper-based fulfillment. These functions fall into several categories, listed here in order of relationship intensity.

Acknowledgment

Just the act of immediately acknowledging an inquiry or order is a powerful communication technique. When a prospect or customer completes a web response form and clicks the "Send" button, an acknowledgment can instantaneously be sent bearing the simple text "Thank you. We have received your inquiry and will process it immediately." In a marketing world that has become depersonalized and automated, getting this type of acknowledgment in direct response to an action is reassuring.

Confirmation

The next step of a business relationship typically requires confirmation of specific information. When you call a toll-free phone number and place an order from a catalog, you interact with another person. This individual not only takes your order, but also confirms it over the phone. He or she will typically repeat your credit card number, verify your name and address, confirm the items you just ordered, and tell you the total amount that will be charged to your credit card. You will also know, before you hang up, when you can expect to receive the items you ordered. Often you will be given an order confirmation number in case you have a problem with receiving the order.

If the same scenario just described takes place at a web storefront today, the customer still has a need to know that the order has been confirmed. In fact, the need is greater, because there may be no person-to-person voice contact - the order is being placed computer-to-computer.

Today's leading Internet-based order generation companies recognize this. Most of them therefore build in a number of confirmation contacts that help to reassure the customer that the order has been properly filled.

At the point of sale, for example, the customer is led through a question-and-answer process, entering necessary data along the way. At the end of this process, a built-in autoresponder feeds back all of the data at once, asking the customer to review it and make necessary changes before pushing that "Send" button one last time. This is an important step in the confirmation process, because the customer is taking responsibility for the accuracy of the transaction.

The next confirmation contact point is typically an email to the customer restating the specifications of the order, confirming that it was understood by the company, and completing the confirmation loop by sending it directly to the user's mailbox. Confirmation at this stage is important for another reason - if the customer did not place the order, or the order is incorrect, the individual can take action at that point.

Finally, some Internet marketers take the confirmation process one step further, informing the customer when the order was shipped and when to expect its arrival. This step is obviously essential if there is a delay in the order, but it is just as useful and reassuring if the order is a normal shipment. Some marketers will include instructions for tracking the shipment at this stage, or even provide an online tracking component to their web site.

I have used customer order confirmation as an example here, but confirmation just as easily applies to an inquiry from a prospect. It is particularly useful in confirming a prospect's attendance at a seminar, for example.

"Instant" Fulfillment

At its highest level of relationship intensity, e-fulfillment functions as the channel for actual physical fulfillment. Traditionally, fulfillment of an inquiry is most often handled through a paper-based transaction. In some cases, an inquiry may be fulfilled via fax, but most often the inquirer receives paper fulfillment, which may include a letter, data sheets, and brochures, perhaps packaged in a folder, all enclosed in a large envelope, and mailed or sometimes delivered via a package delivery service.

Even if the inquiry goes through a two-step fulfillment process, the individual receives, at the very least, a mailing with some additional information and a reply device designed to further qualify that person's interest. If the individual responds to this step, he or she will receive additional information from the marketer. Whatever the marketer sends, there will be a time lag unless the fulfillment is by fax only. That means a potentially hot prospect will continue to cool off as days or even weeks go by.

Although it may be unrealistic to convert the entire paper fulfillment process to electronic fulfillment, moving toward fulfillment over the Internet has to be an attractive long-term alternative. For one thing, electronic fulfillment is environmentally friendly.

Traditional fulfillment is paper-based and labor-intensive. Electronic fulfillment, on the other hand, does not waste trees, ink, or time. It does not have to be produced in quantities of one, ten, 50, or 100 thousand. It does not have to be cut, folded, stapled, and inserted into folders and envelopes. It does not burden your staff (or Postal Service workers). In short, it saves natural resources, time, and money.

Now printed literature can have a longer shelf life, because time-sensitive information can be just as easily conveyed electronically, on the web. Collateral materials can be mirrored electronically to leverage copy and artwork. This extends far beyond the point of a casual convenience for prospects and customers. Electronic fulfillment is a desirable means of delivering information almost instantaneously - at a cost that is just too low to ignore. The need for printed literature may still exist in certain circumstances, but it can be substantially reduced with electronic fulfillment.

Electronic fulfillment provides customers and prospects with a new kind of "instant gratification." They can receive information instantly in an electronic form that can be viewed online or printed out and saved. They can just as easily unlock or download information of high perceived value or software that they can demo, try, and buy, right from the computer desktop. Information can even be personalized to meet the individual's specific needs and delivered free and on a regular basis to the individual's computer. Based on the individual's feedback, electronic fulfillment can be further tailored.

Electronic fulfillment thus becomes the beginning of a relationship. You can engage your prospect or customer in a dialogue, which allows you to continuously learn more about the individual's real needs. You can collect data from the prospect or customer by asking questions on electronic

surveys and response forms, and then turn the answers into marketing intelligence. You can then use this intelligence to build a highly effective communication program, tailored to individual needs. Database-driven electronic fulfillment ultimately meets the informational needs of many individuals, one person at a time.

Meanwhile, you drastically reduce the costs and lag time of traditional fulfillment. You develop an ongoing one-to-one relationship with the prospect or customer, learn more about that person's specific needs, and reap the financial and timesaving benefits of electronic fulfillment.